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THE WHITE HOUSE

EXCHANGE OF REMARKS  
BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT

AND

JESSE OWENS

1936 OLYMPIC GOLD MEDAL WINNER

THE EAST GARDEN

3:15 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Distinguished athletes and guests, members of the Commission on Olympic Sports:

A few weeks ago I had the privilege of seeing all of you at Plattsburg and being your guest on that occasion, and it is a great privilege and pleasure for me and Mrs. Ford to welcome all of you here in the East Garden of the White House.

At that time in Plattsburg, I congratulated you on making the American Olympic Team. I wished you good luck before you left for Montreal and I am very happy to welcome you all back and to congratulate you once again, this time for having done a magnificent, a superb job.

I hope the athletes have had an opportunity in the last few days to rest up a bit. Let me say that you were not alone in your feats of stamina and strength. Millions of Americans, including myself, are now recovering from the marathon sessions with their TV sets. (Laughter) We watched you and your teammates rack up 94 medals, a truly outstanding performance.

You won gold, silver and bronze. Some of you set records. You gave your utmost effort, and on behalf of all Americans, we were very, very proud of you.

Your achievements are more impressive, in my judgment, for the fact you were up against some of the athletes whose training is subsidized in various ways by their governments. In this country it has always been up to those with talent to make their own way, in training and in preparing for the highest level of competition. Our belief in the independence of the athlete and the importance of the amateur tradition has held us back from all-out Government support.

As one of your teammates said, and said so well, "I wouldn't trade any of my personal freedom for all the records in the world." At the same time, I believe the Federal Government can do more to help athletically talented young people achieve their very best in the Olympic competition.

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Earlier this year, I proposed to provide funding for the permanent winter sports facilities at Lake Placid, New York, to be used for the 1980 Winter Olympics and, therefore, to train future American champions. We can do more than that in the long run. Therefore, I am asking the Congress to extend the life of my Commission on Olympic Sports until January of next year. In that time I am asking the Commission not only to address the problem of sports organization in the United States, but also to recommend effective mechanisms for funding training and development of our Olympic competitors.

Other countries have found creative ideas other than Government funding. I am confident we will find ways in which American athletes can be provided the means for Olympic training and development while preserving their bona fide amateur status.

This year's Olympic Games, as you all know, have their share of controversy. International politics sometimes threatened to overshadow athletic achievements. In the last week or two we have even heard some people calling for the Olympic flame to be permanently extinguished.

I strongly disagree. I am confident that the Olympic Games can be freed from world politics in the future, reviving the spirit of sacred armistice which prevailed at the original Games hundreds of years ago. I am confident that in the long run the larger view will prevail -- that a great athletic performance is a personal achievement before it is a national achievement.

Whatever their nationality, all athletes are working against the same physical and mental constraints of the human body, of gravity and time. The challenges that all athletes face in common are more important than the boundaries that divide them.

That is the true spirit of the Olympic Games. It is in that spirit that I pledge our efforts to insure that in 1980, at which time we will be hosting the Olympic Games in Lake Placid, politics be kept out of the arena.

We will welcome every team recognized by the International Olympic Committee. Attempts to use the Olympic Games for international power politics will ultimately backfire. Our friend Jesse Owens, here with us today, proved that.

In 1936, when Jesse Owens, or when Adolph Hitler was trying to turn the Games into a spectacle that would glorify racist dogma of the Nazi State, there was a strong movement in the United States against our participation in the Games.

As it turned out, U.S. participation in those Olympics provided a sharp rebuke of Hitler's racist rubbish. Five black American athletes won eight gold medals in track and field. One American athlete in particular proved that excellence knows no racial or political limits. That man is Jesse Owens.

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I don't have to tell any of you who studied the history of the Olympics of his phenomenal career. I happened to be a student at the University of Michigan when Jesse Owens was a student at Ohio State -- as Woody calls it, that school up north. (Laughter) I saw Jesse Owens at a Big 10 track meet in Ann Arbor as one of some 10,000 or 12,000 spectators when he broke three world records and tied a fourth. His performance that day in the broad jump -- 26 feet 8-1/4 inches -- was not equaled for 25 years. It was a triumph that all of us will remember.

In the 1936 Olympics, Jesse Owens won four gold medals -- the 100-meter, the 200-meter, the 400-meter relay and the broad jump. He personally achieved what no statesman, journalist or general achieved at that time -- he forced Adolph Hitler to leave the stadium rather than acknowledge the superb victories of a black American.

Fifteen years later, revisiting the same stadium, Jesse Owens received a standing ovation when he urged his audience, and I quote, "To stand fast with us for freedom and democracy." Giants like Jesse Owens show us why politics will never defeat the Olympic spirit. His character, his achievements have continued to inspire Americans as they did the whole world in 1936.

He brought his own talents into the service of others, as a speaker, as an author, as a coach. He has inspired many young men and women to achieve their very best for themselves and for America. As an American who rose from poverty to a position of leadership, he has motivated many, many others to make the most of what America has to offer.

Jesse Owens is a modest man. Jesse may wonder why I am singing his praises here today.

Jesse, would you please step forward?

Jesse, it is my great privilege to present you today with the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor that your country can bestow. And I present you with this medal on behalf of the people of the United States. For them in particular, and especially for the athletes like those here today, your character, your achievements will always be a source of inspiration.

The citation reads as follows: "To Jesse Owens, athlete, humanitarian, speaker, author -- a master of the spirit as well as the mechanics of sport. He is a winner who knows that winning is not everything. He has shared with others his courage, his dedication to the highest ideals of sportsmanship. His achievements have shown us all the promise of America and his faith in America has inspired countless others to do their best for themselves and for their country."

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MR. OWENS: Thank you very much, Mr. President, and to you, ladies and gentlemen of this great Nation of ours:

On this occasion, I have one of my gold medals with me. Fortunately, I won four in 1936. Those medals, yes, have gathered a little dust, but I have four gold medals, Mr. President, that are so much a part of me. And, of course, I have my 100-meter gold medal with me today, and that is my wife. (Laughter)

I might say to the secretary of our Olympic Committee, Mr. Don Miller; our executive officer, Mr. Kane; and to Dot McKay, Mr. McKay and Howard Cosell; sitting in this audience is a former teammate of mine, too, and that is Congressman Levine at Ohio State University.

I just want to thank America. You know, we did not win all of the gold medals at the Olympic Games, but we won something that no other nation in this world can ever have. At the Olympic Games, ladies and gentlemen, the place to be was the American area.

All nations of the world gathered there to be able to receive some of the things that America can give to its people that no other nation in the world can give. We may have disagreements in our country, but when we enter that field of competition, and you walk out on that field behind your own flagbearer, and when that competition begins, there is no color, and there is no barrier. Each person on that team, Mr. President, is wishing each other well.

As I said in Montreal -- and I can recall 40 years ago that day -- I don't care where anybody lives, I don't care what they do, because you can be born into anything in this Nation, as I was born in the cottonfields of Alabama, and today I stand before you and shake hands with the Commander-in-Chief of our Nation.

This is America. Go where you will and go where you may, there is no country under the eyes of God such as we live in today.

I think that, ladies and gentlemen, you in America here, Coach Walker and Mr. McKay, with your team at the Olympic Games, you brought it into the homes of every American person and every civilized nation of the world. We want to thank you, and our boys and girls thank you, too.

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So many things -- and I am not lost for words (Laughter) -- but I can remember back in 1935, I can remember our President playing football for the University of Michigan. I can also remember that on that football team was an athlete by the name of Willis Ward, with whom they played together, a good friend of mine today in Detroit, Michigan.

I can also say that being able to attend and to go, to be able to represent our Nation, thank you America. Thank you ladies and gentlemen.

As you leave here today, and you go back to the homes from which you have come, my prayer is, ladies and gentlemen, as I have oftentimes said, that whether you are riding or whether you are walking, my prayer is that may God ride with you, may He walk with you, and may He continue to give you the guidance and understanding for the privilege that we have to live upon the earth.

As we, here in America, as He looks down on us from up above, we can look back and say, yes, oh God, through the Olympic movement and the American way of life, we will and can give you a better world, and a better place for mankind to live.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen.

END (AT 3:31 P.M. EDT)